

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Overdose Incidents in Federal Custody, 2019/2020

Overdose incidents in federal custody increased by 58% in 2019/2020, reflecting an ongoing upward trend. Incidents were disproportionate to the Ontario region and most often involved opioids or prescription medications.

Why we did this study

Corresponding with the opioid crisis in Canada, there has been a notable increase in the number of overdose incidents in federal custody (McKendy et al., 2020). As part of ongoing tracking efforts, the current study provides an overview of non-fatal overdose incidents in federal institutions in 2019/2020.

What we did

An incident search was conducted of CSC's administrative database to identify all reported non-fatal overdose incidents in 2019/2020. Incidents included were those in which the consumption of drugs precipitated medical intervention (e.g., administration of NARCAN) and/or resulted in a designation of Serious Bodily Injury. Information was recorded pertaining to incident circumstances and victim characteristics.

What we found

In 2019/2020, there were 174 non-fatal overdose incidents in federal custody, a 58% increase from 2018/2019 (see Table 1). The number of incidents nearly doubled in Ontario, where 43% of incidents occurred. In a majority of cases (i.e., 85%), the incident appeared to be accidental (i.e., there was no evidence of intentionality).

As in previous years, contributing substances were often not identified (i.e., in nearly two-thirds of cases). The most frequently identified substances remained opioids (36%) followed by prescription medications (19%). Fentanyl remained the most commonly reported opioid (24% overall).

The profile of offenders involved in overdose incidents in 2019/2020 was similar to that in previous years. Offenders tended to be White (48%) or Indigenous (36%), in their twenties to forties (73%), housed at men's institutions (95%), and classified as medium security (69%). Offenders were typically serving time for violent index offences (72%), such as Robbery or Homicide-related. Regarding risk/need measures, offenders tended to have low Reintegration Potential (58%), high Static Risk (78%) and high Dynamic Need (85%). Case reviews revealed many had complex profile considerations; e.g., prior substance use issues (96%), mental health concerns (67%), and histories of self-harming behaviours (52%).

Table 1. Non-Fatal Overdose Incidents in Federal Custody, 2017/2018 - 2019/2020 by Region.

	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Atlantic	4	2	12
Quebec	13	23	23
Ontario	16	35	74
Prairie	36	34	29
Pacific	15	16	36
Total	84	110	174

What it means

Overdose incidents remain an ongoing concern for the Correctional Service of Canada. Data from 2019/2020 indicate that overdose incidents have continued to increase in federal custody, with regional shifts. The peak in Ontario in 2019/2020 appeared to be tied to opioid-related cases, paralleling community trends (Hatt, 2022).

CSC continues to undertake measures to mitigate substance-related harms, including health interventions, harm reduction services, substance misuse programs, and preventative strategies. Ongoing tracking of overdose incidents remains key to informing approaches to improve offender health outcomes and enhance the safety and security of institutions.

References

- McKendy, L., Biro, S., Stanley, D., Miron, M., Taylor, J., & Keown, L.A. (2020). Overdose Incidents in Federal Custody, 2018/2019 (Special Report SR-20-01). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.
- Hatt, L. (2022). The Opioid Crisis in Canada (Publication No. 2021-23-E. 8). Legal and Social Affairs Division, Library of Parliament, Government of Canada.

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